

Why House Democrats are eager to force votes on doomed gun control bills

Updated by Matthew Yglesias @mattyglesias matt@vox.com Jun 22, 2016, 1:23pm EDT

A week after a <u>Senate filibuster forced a vote on gun control measures</u>, Democrats in the House of Representatives are holding a sit-in on the House floor to try to get Republicans there to do the same.

"The time for silence and patience is long gone," Rep. John Lewis, the Georgia Democrat and hero of the civil rights movement who is leading the sit-in, said in a stirring speech Wednesday morning. "The American people are demanding action. Do we have the courage, do we have the raw courage to make at least a down payment on ending **gun violence in America**?"

But whether they get their vote or not isn't going to make any practical difference. Democrats are in the minority in the House, and the bills they favor don't have the support to pass. What's more, we *already know* this legislation doesn't have the 60 votes it would need to pass the Senate.

Beyond that, these measures are exceptionally modest as a policy matter — steps that even in a best-case scenario would do <u>barely anything to reduce gun violence in the United States</u>. These modest ideas <u>poll well</u> but are unlikely to be big practical political winners, because <u>gun rights proponents are much more politically active on gun issues</u> than are proponents of gun control, who generally favor more regulation but do so in a low-key way.

Nonetheless, the very fact that we are having a political standoff over gun regulation this week is a substantial strategic victory for the Democrats — taking the politically dangerous events of the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando and at worst neutralizing them.

Democrats have worried that terrorism will help Trump

The possibility that <u>terrorist attacks might shift the electoral terrain in Donald Trump's favor</u> has been one of Democrats' biggest worries since Trump emerged as the presumptive Republican nominee.

In a dream world, of course, Democrats would like to think that focusing voters' attention on the prospect of national peril would lead them to reject an inexperienced and unqualified nominee. But many GOP elites had just such dreams last winter, only to see them shattered when the San Bernardino shootings only boosted the appeal of Trump's xenophobia.

More broadly, both experimental and real-world studies have tended to show that in the US and abroad, the major party with a more hawkish reputation usually benefits when international terror becomes a major concern.

For instance, Michael Koch, Laron Williams, and Jason Smith studied how quickly various parliamentary governments lost their majority coalitions after transnational terrorist attacks in <u>a 2012 paper</u>. What they found was that right-leaning governments had an easier time holding on to power than left-leaning governments did. It seems the left gets more blame for terrorist attacks that occur under its watch.

Then there's evidence from Israel that indicates that terror helps the right at the ballot box. Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor found that a terror attack in an Israeli locality shortly before the election causes, on average, "an increase of 1.35 percentage points on that locality's support for the right bloc of political parties." And Anna Getmansky and Thomas Zeitzoff found that after rockets are fired into areas of Israel, even if there are no casualties, support for right-wing parties spikes in those areas by 2 to 6 percent.

Shifting the argument to guns is a strategic win

In that context, focusing the political argument on gun regulation rather than on suspected Orlando shooter Omar Mateen's admiration for ISIS or questions around Muslim immigration to the United States is a strategic win. Democrats may not win many votes with thin-gruel, poll-tested gun control proposals, but they aren't going to lose any.

Last fall, by contrast, the American political system found itself gripped with <u>vague</u> <u>fears about Syrian refugees</u> that led to <u>state-level refugee bans</u> and <u>congressional legislation that scared vulnerable Democrats</u>, as part of a <u>larger</u> <u>cultural trend toward Islamophobia</u>.

That's perilous political terrain for Democrats, and the basic facts of the Mateen case suggested the possibility that the conversation would shift back into that mode.

A couple of popular-but-doomed and not-very-important gun control bills that the National Rifle Association and the Republican Party will filibuster to death, by contrast, is very safe ground for Democrats. Something they can talk about until the next thing comes up and the news cycle shifts.

Democrats are united; Republicans are divided

Most of all, the gun bills represent common ground across the Democratic Party.

President Obama supports them, and so does everyone from Bernie Sanders to Elizabeth Warren to Joe Manchin. Hillary Clinton is comfortable running on them, and so are Democratic Senate challengers in New Hampshire and Ohio.

Republicans, by contrast, are divided, with ultra-vulnerable Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL) defecting to the Democratic camp and the likes of Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Susan Collins (R-ME) at least trying to demonstrate openness to compromise.

Trump himself, meanwhile, has thrown GOP messaging into chaos. He's been trying to act like an orthodox NRA conservative on guns, but the debate has revealed that — surprise — he doesn't really understand this issue. His instinct was to say that Orlando showed the country would have been better off if more Pulse clubgoers had been packing heat, a position so absurd that even the NRA — which does not condone gunplay under the influence of alcohol — condemned.

Now Trump is backtracking, trying to say that he didn't say what he clearly did say about wishing random clubgoers had opened fire in a crowded room after knocking back a few drinks.

Meanwhile, he continues to fight with <u>Republican congressional leaders over his</u> proposed ban on <u>Muslim immigration</u>.

This, more than the specifics of the bills, is the big political win for Democrats. Casual observers of the political scene see Democrats responding to tragedy with a clear agenda, while Republicans are responding with infighting driven by the erratic and unpopular character at the top of their ticket. It's not bad for a few days' work, especially on an issue that's supposed to be the other party's strength.